

Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee Minutes

6:00 -7:15 PM – May 29, 2014 – Middletown Public Library

Attendees

Present: **Barbara A. VonVillas**, Middletown Town Council, Chair; **Justin S. McLaughlin**, Newport City Council, Vice Chair; **Richard P. Adams**, Middletown Town Council; **Kellie E. DiPalma**, Middletown School Committee; **Sandra J. Flowers**, Newport School Committee; **Naomi L. Neville**, Newport City Council; **Robert B. Power**, Newport School Committee;

Not Present: **William R. O’Connell**, Middletown School Committee; **Marco T. Camacho**, Newport City Council (Alternate)

Approval of Minutes

The minutes of May 7, 2014 were reviewed and unanimously approved.

Discussion

Unified High School White Paper

A general discussion was held of the contents of a “White Paper” describing how high school unification could be implemented and addressing the issues and challenges. Mr. Adams indicated that the draft was very preliminary and needed inputs from all Committee members. Of special concern were identification of those subjects which are not included in the draft, but should be, such as diversity issues.

As presently envisioned the paper will provide data and information related to all issues which the Committee identified and discussed using draft enabling legislation as a subject guide as well as addressing other issues raised by the public and others.

The Committee then discussed the various alternative governance structures which should be included in the White Paper.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Draft

The committee provided comments and change suggestions on a draft set of FAQ sheets which would be used at various public meetings. The committee generally liked the idea of using FAQ’s as a convenient way to address issues in a concise format, but suggested that the sheets be consolidated and questions arranged by general subject.

General subject areas suggested were Governance, Education and Programs, Finances, Personnel Matters and Next Steps. A revised version of the FAQ’s will be distributed as soon as practicable.

The Committee then considered a variety of questions and suggested responses related to financial arrangements, data sources and accuracy. It was also suggested that the FAQ responses use relevant school comparisons when appropriate. The 25 year Middletown High School staffing comparison discussed at the previous meeting was thought to be useful but too detailed for FAQ.

A general discussion followed discussion of the FAQ of cost per student data source, accuracy limitations and uses; programs which should be provided by high schools but which cannot because of resources constraints and how to prevent students from dropping out prior to graduation. It was noted that the new Pell Elementary School had created an unexpected increase in attendance. Although analysis of data is not complete, it was generally thought that the new school was attracting students who would otherwise have attended private institutions.

Referenda

A copy of the resolution and approved by the Middletown Town Council was distributed to the Committee. A brief description of the Middletown Council discussion related to the referendum was provided by Ms. VonVillas and Mr. Adams. The Newport referendum question will be the same with the exception of the sentence explaining that the referendum is non-binding.

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Public Information

The Committee discussed the general format of the League of Women Voters (LWV) information meeting scheduled for June 24th at CCRI Newport. The meeting to be held at 7:00 PM will be a general informational meeting and public discussion. Moderated by the LWV, members of the Committee may be asked to participate to answer questions, however, it was emphasized that all decisions related to the format of the meeting were to be decided by the LWV leadership. Ms. VonVillas was asked to be the point of contact between the Committee and the LWV leadership. [Post meeting note: the meeting was changed to Monday June 23rd due to scheduling conflicts.]

Attachments

Newspaper coverage following May 29, 2014 meeting is attached.

Proposed Meetings Calendar

The next meeting has been scheduled at the Newport Public Library on Tuesday June 17, 2014 at 6:00 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,



Richard Adams

Newport Daily News

May 30, 2014

UNIFIED SCHOOL TALKS

Committee plans its next move

By Matt Sheley

NEWPORT — Cue the sales pitch for a unified high school for Newport and Middletown.

The night after the Newport City Council unanimously approved a resolution to place a nonbinding question on the Election Day ballot on whether the two communities should join to form a high school, the Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee met Thursday night to go over what's next.

In a meeting room of the Newport Public Library, committee members had a free-flowing conversation about how best to move forward and ways to get the most input.

The group also announced a June 24 public forum had been scheduled with the League of Women Voters, likely starting at 6 p.m. at a location yet to be determined.

"Way back when we sat here on those cold nights, the purpose has always been the kids," Newport School Committee member Sandra J. Flowers said. "That hasn't changed through all of this and it won't change. It's for the kids."

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On Monday night at 7, the Middletown Town Council is slated to revisit the unification issue and vote formally on whether to place the item on the Nov. 4 ballot.

Last week, a split Middletown council voted 4-3 to ask Town Solicitor Michael W. Miller and Town Clerk Wendy J.W. Marshall to craft language to place on the ballot, pending approval from the council and the secretary of state. Council President Christopher T. Semonelli and council members Richard P. Adams, Bruce J. Long and Barbara A. VonVillas were in favor, with Vice President Robert J. Sylvia and council members Paul M. Rodrigues and M. Theresa Santos against.

Opening the exploratory committee's meeting Thursday night, Newport officials said they were pleased the City Council had voted 7-0 to back a one-page resolution including the question, "Should Newport and Middletown join together to form a unified high school?" The last line of the resolution specified the item should go back to the Newport council for approval once the final language is determined.

Newport Councilman Justin S. McLaughlin suggested it would be better if the school boards in Newport and Middletown weighed in on the issue too. In response, Newport School Committee member Robert B. Power expressed confidence his colleagues would approve the item, but Middletown School Committee Vice Chairwoman Kellie E. DiPalma said she wasn't quite sure how her board would vote on the issue.

From there, the group went through a preliminary document and question-and-answer fact sheets outlining the options for such a partnership. The issues include how the school would be funded and governed, what the staffing levels would be and what educational opportunities would be offered.

Members said that as part of any discussion, there has to be a realistic talk about the challenges and obstacles facing the effort.

One of the main items of discussion was who was going to pay for what — a sticking point since the beginning of the conversations in early January.

"Nobody is sitting here saying, 'Rogers kids don't get a good education' and 'Middletown kids don't get a good education,'" Power said. "We're just saying that when you put those two groups together, the possibilities for the kids to have a lot of other things they don't have now at a rate that people can afford is right there. And for them to do it on their own is not affordable."

There seemed to be consensus on mailing Newport and Middletown residents a paper in September explaining the unification undertaking, what it could cost and other details. That way, committee members agreed, the voters in both communities could get information directly from the source, rather than rely on rumors and speculation.

Based on his historical look at the data, Middletown Councilman Adams said he saw school officials in his community doing the best they could with the hand they had been dealt.

For example, Adams said a look at staffing at Middletown High School from 25 years ago showed that many subjects where courses were not mandated — such as social studies and languages — were reduced while areas subject to standardized testing — reading, mathematics and writing — were kept as level as possible.

"There is a story here of school systems under pressure, both from declining enrollments and financial constraints, and they did some rational things, but the outcome is not desirable," Adams said. "It's not something that's caused by lack of trying by the school departments or the administration."

Besides a reporter from The Daily News, there were no audience members present at the meeting. The next meeting of the unified board was set for Tuesday, June 17, at 5:30 p.m., tentatively at the Newport Public Library.

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Newport Daily News

June 3, 2014

School question to appear on ballot

By Matt Sheley

A nonbinding question about whether Middletown and Newport should merge high schools officially will be on the ballot on Election Day in Middletown.

With no discussion and by a 4-3 vote Monday night at Town Hall, the Town Council approved a resolution to put the question “Should Newport and Middletown join to establish a unified high school” before voters on Nov. 4.

Council President Christopher T. Semonelli and council members Richard P. Adams, Bruce J. Long and Barbara A. VonVillas voted in favor of the resolution, with Paul M. Rodrigues and M. Theresa Santos joining council Vice President Robert J. Sylvia in opposition.

The Newport City Council on Wednesday night unanimously supported placing the same question to city voters on the Nov. 4 ballot.

The question is nonbinding, meaning it does not legally bind either community to do anything, and is more for informational purposes than anything else.

“Obviously, I’m very pleased with this,” said Von-Villas, who has served as chairwoman of a joint exploratory committee with Newport studying the issue.

“It’s very clear from the lengthy discussion that we had tonight about the school budget that the current system is unsustainable, and maybe it’s time that we do something different,” she said.

Newport and Middletown officials have been meeting since the beginning of the year to see if the two communities can find enough common ground to combine high schools.

A unified high school is seen as a way to increase educational offerings to students in both communities as well as potentially save money. A 2009 report by the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council indicated Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth stood to save about \$13 million by merging schools by fiscal 2013.

Since the unification talks started, some local leaders — led by council Vice President Robert J. Sylvia — have ratcheted up pressure against the move, saying Middletown schools were doing well enough on their own and didn’t need to inherit any complications from Newport.

At the council’s last meeting on May 19, by the same 4-3 mark, the council gave tentative approval of the unified high school question, with formal approval granted Monday night. Now the ballot question will head to the General Assembly and secretary of state for inclusion on the Nov. 4 ballot.

VonVillas and Adams are the Middletown council’s representatives on the Newport County Unified High School Exploratory Committee.

At the committee’s most recent meeting, members announced a June 24 informational forum had been scheduled through the League of Women Voters. After Monday’s meeting, VonVillas and Adams said they still were working out a time and location for the session.

The exploratory committee’s next meeting is slated for June 17 at 5:30 p.m. at the Newport Public Library.